

Why Torah?

‘Torah’ is a Hebrew word meaning ‘teaching’ or ‘instruction.’

‘Torah,’ in its specific sense, refers to the first five books of that part of the Bible which we Christians usually call the Old Testament. The five books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

In Judaism ‘Torah’ also has a broader usage. It can refer to the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as to the Oral Tradition (further storytelling and legal teachings which explain and elaborate on the biblical text).

At the October 2008 Bishops’ Synod, Cardinal Albert Vanhoye (former secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission), drew attention to Vatican documents which underscore the close relationship between Jews and Christians, especially in relation to their shared scriptures:

“The Old Testament is not simply a piece among others in the Christian Bible. It is the base, the fundamental part,” he said. “If the New Testament was established on another basis, it would have no real value. Without its conformity to the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people, it could not be presented as the accomplishment of God’s project.”

As a faithful Jew, Jesus’ life and teachings were firmly and deeply rooted in Torah. By coming to appreciate better the Hebrew Scriptures, we draw close to Jesus and we strengthen the base on which so much of our understanding of the bible depends.

Why ‘light’ of Torah?

In the Hebrew Scriptures and in the storytelling traditions of the Jewish people, the Torah is described as spiritual illumination.

The Lord make His face to shine upon you...with the light of the Torah... May he enlighten your eyes and heart in the Torah...as you read, For the commandment is a lamp, and the Torah is light (Prov 6:23). Numbers Rabbah 11,6

But those who study the Torah give forth light wherever they may be. It is like one standing in the dark with a lamp in his hand, as it says, Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (Ps. 94, 105). Exodus Rabbah 36,3

Light. A fitting symbol of the grace that enters our lives when we immerse ourselves in God’s Word. Likewise, the lamp which bears the light is a powerful image in the tradition. Sometimes it refers to God’s commandments, the way we must live to experience fullness of life. Other times it refers to the human soul as in this rabbinic comment which follows on from the quotation above. *God said: ‘Let My lamp be in your hand, and your lamp in My hand’ (Exodus Rabbah 36,3).*